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Testimony in Opposition to SB 297

Submitted by Lis Regula, Jewish Educator and College Instructor

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Reynolds, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to SB 297. My name is Lis Regula, and I am a Jewish man and college instructor. My testimony today draws on my lived experiences and my commitment to academic freedom and free speech.

SB 297 incorporates the IHRA definition of antisemitism, a vague and misleading framework that conflates legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism. This conflation poses grave threats to First Amendment freedoms, silences necessary critiques of Israeli policies, and undermines efforts to combat real antisemitism.

As someone deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, I find the IHRA definition troubling for several reasons:

- 1. Inaccuracy of the IHRA Definition**

The deliberate expansion of the IHRA definition to conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism is harmful and dangerous to communities, campuses, and free speech. Anti-Zionism is not antisemitism, and equating the two erases the diverse voices within the Jewish community, including those of Jewish anti-Zionists. This conflation also distracts from addressing the actual rise in antisemitism, which is deeply rooted in white supremacy and hate.

- 2. A Jewish Perspective on “Hereness” and Justice**

Before the advent of Zionism, many Jews embraced the concept of *doykait*—a focus on living and thriving in the here and now, wherever Jews resided. Judaism existed long before the establishment of the Israeli state, and equating Jewish identity solely with Zionism is both historically inaccurate and deeply offensive to many Jews. As someone who remembers this heritage, I reject the notion that my identity or safety as a Jew is tied to unwavering support for the Israeli state.

- 3. Impact on Campus and Academic Freedom**

As a college educator, I am deeply concerned about the chilling effect SB 297 will have on free speech and academic inquiry. The IHRA definition has already been used to suppress discussions of Palestinian rights and legitimate critiques of Israeli policies. It risks silencing Jewish and non-Jewish students and faculty who advocate for justice and human rights, particularly Palestinian voices, who are already marginalized.

4. **A Call for an Alternative: The JDA Definition**

If Ohio legislators are interested in fighting antisemitism, I would emphasize the importance of adopting the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) as an alternative framework to the IHRA definition. Unlike the IHRA definition, the JDA provides clear guidance, distinguishing antisemitism from legitimate political critique. Implementing this definition would protect free speech while addressing genuine antisemitism.

5. **The Dangers of Misdirection**

This bill does nothing to address the real threats of antisemitism, which manifest in acts of violence, hate speech, and discrimination against Jews. Instead, it seeks to criminalize peaceful protests, marginalize Palestinians and their allies, and stifle necessary critiques of human rights violations. This misdirection is unhelpful and harmful to the communities it claims to protect.

6. **Reflections on Zionism's Safety Promise**

My own experiences, including visits to Israel, have shown me that Zionism has not made Jewish people safer in the world. The rise of global antisemitism is not linked to criticism of Israel but to systemic issues of racism and hate.

In conclusion, SB 297 is a misguided and harmful piece of legislation that risks stifling free speech, erasing diverse Jewish voices, and marginalizing already vulnerable communities. As an Ohioan concerned with the increasing state intrusion into institutions of higher learning, I urge this committee to reject SB 297 and consider the JDA definition a more accurate and constructive alternative.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Lis Regula